DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 253 318 EA 017 756

TITLE Increasing Personal and Organizational Effectiveness. Treatise No. 3: "Understanding Sources of Organizational Conflict and Conflict Management Strategies."

INSTITUTION New Mexico Research and Study Council, Albuquerque.

PUB DATE 1 Jun 83

NOTE 14p.; For related documents, see EA 017 754-759.

PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Conflict; *Conflict Resolution; Group Dynamics; Organizational Communication; Organizational Effectiveness

ABSTRACT

Conflict within organizations must be managed to maximize its useful aspects while minimizing those that are dysfunctional. Conflict can be interpersonal or can stem from the structural characteristics of the organization. Sources of conflict include win-or-lose situations that reduce cooperation by fostering competition, incompatibility among the goals of organizational sub-units, and concerns about status and authority. Reactions to conflict include avoidance, limiting discussion to areas of agreement, forcing compliance with authoritative decisions, compromising, and collaboration. Among the strategies that can be employed in resolving conflict are increasing intergroup contacts, developing superordinate goals, and restructuring the organization. Administrators must learn appropriate management skills to know when and how to apply these strategies for maximal effect. (PGD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED258318

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Richard J. Trocigan
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

INCREASING PERSONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

TREATISE NO. 3

"UNDERSTANDING SOURCES OF ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES"

NEW MEXICO RESEARCH AND STUDY COUNCIL
214 ONATE HALL, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO
ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO 87131
(505) 277-2621

EA 017 752

The New Mexico Research and Study Council adopted its Constitution on January 14, 1959, with sixteen public school districts, the State Department of Education, and the University of New Mexico becoming charter members. Today, the Council is fifty-six members strong, and is celebrating, during this 1983-84 school year, twenty-five years of educational service to New Mexico's youth.

The Council is an organization designed specifically to facilitate co-operative study and solution of educational concerns. Through the combined resources, assistance, and direction of members, the Council strives to improve and expand elementary and secondary education in New Mexico.

This publication represents the Council's first effort at celebrating this auspicious occasion, the Silver Anniversary Year of the New Mexico Research and Study Council.

OFFICERS AND MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Gordon L. King, President (Superintendent of Schools, Aztec)
Melvin Cordova, President-Elect (Superintendent of Schools, Zuni)
Dr. Howard Overby, Secretary-Treasurer (Superintendent of Schools, Grants)
Leonila Serna (Superintendent of Schools, Taos)
Felix Duran (Superintendent of Schools, Penasco)
Charles Ellis (Superintendent of Schools, Reserve)
Stanley Newton (Superintendent of Schools, Estancia)
Don Wood (Superintendent of Schools, Socorro)
Garfield Gutierrez (Educational Specialist, New Mexico State Department of Education)
Dr. Richard F. Tonigan (Executive Director, NMRSC)

STAFF MEMBERS

Patricia L. Tolley, Staff Assistant
Beatrice L. Davis, Special Assistant
Kurt W. Knoernschild, Special Assistant
Nancy S. Schilling, Special Assistant
Dr. Richard F. Tonigan, Executive Director

June 1, 1983

PREFACE

Six edifying and thoughtful expositive papers are being distributed to the educational administrators of New Mexico as one of several special Twenty-fifth Anniversary efforts of the New Mexico Research and Study Council. The personal and organizational topics and their approximate 1983 publication dates are as follows:

1. Understanding Organizational Patterns (April 15)
2. Characteristics of Effective Organizations (May 1)
3. Understanding Sources of Organizational Conflict And Conflict Management Strategies (May 15)
4. Time Management Techniques (June 1)
5. Maintaining Successful Communications (June 15)
6. Promoting The Organization (July 1)

We owe thanks to the American Association of School Administrators and its National Academy For School Executives for providing the impetus which led us to the development of this series of abstracts. The Council had initially hoped to participate in the Academy's July 1983 Colorado Springs seminar titled "Increasing Personal And Organizational Effectiveness", but when legislated school budget reductions made such an educational experience an impossibility for 1983, we utilized the Academy's seminar description as the basis for preparing these treatises.

The papers were initially researched and drafted by Bea Davis, a Council graduate assistant, as her primary assistantship assignment during the spring

semester of 1983. Bea and I "polished" the papers, and release them as Council publications envisioning that practicing school administrators will utilize them as useful self-education and staff-education conveyances.

Superintendents, after reading each treatise, are encouraged to have the six compendia placed in a three-ring binder or other easy-to-use professional library reference folder and to share the publications with subordinates and other key faculty and staff members.

Preparing papers for colleagues to read (and critique) is a weighty task. I appreciate the effort put forth by Bea Davis in encapsulating in a relatively brief set of papers an extensive, multifarious and utilitarian array of views, concepts, and principles applicable to the everyday thoughts and endeavors of both administrative theorists and practitioners.

Dr. Richard F. Tonigan

UNDERSTANDING SOURCES OF ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT ANALYSIS

Educational institutions, like all other organizations, inevitably experience organizational conflict. Competing philosophies, objectives, methods, and personalities are all part of organizational life. Managers surveyed by the American Management Association reported that 24 percent of their time was spent dealing with conflict situations. These managers also rated conflict management as a concern of equal or more importance than planning, communication, motivation, and decision making. Sources of conflict can be interpersonal in nature, or they can stem from the very structure of an organization. Conflict can also be either useful or dysfunctional. Given that some degree of conflict is inevitable, administrators must seek ways to take advantage of it whenever possible, and try to minimize or avoid that which is dysfunctional. Understanding the sources of organizational conflict and developing effective conflict management strategies, therefore, can be most beneficial.

Organizational conflict, when left unchecked, can have serious and destructive outcomes. Conflict can deflect attention from goal achievement and can result in long-term animosities that undermine the health of the organization and its personnel. Energy and interest can be diluted or diverted in unproductive directions. Lippitt and Taylor in Management Development and Training Handbook in listing the destructive outcomes of conflict,

include the following:

1. Diverts energy from the task at hand
2. Destroys morale
3. Polarizes individuals and groups
4. Deepens differences
5. Obstructs cooperative action
6. Produces irresponsible behavior
7. Creates suspicion and distruct
8. Decreases productivity

Since conflict is apparently unavoidable and potentially so destructive, it is imperative that school administrators be prepared to both understand it and cope with it, as it arises, or preferably, before it even develops. School administrators need a conceptual framework within which to analyze the conflict laden events and situations they encounter. The ability to analyze conflict, comprehend its causes and perceive individual controversies in a broader context is central to effective management.

SOURCES OF CONFLICT

According to Dalmar Fisher in Communication in Organization (1981), there are certain general characteristics of organizations that tend to produce potentially dysfunctional conflicts. These typical sources, once identified, can help administrators perceive them more quickly. They include:

1. Win-lose and game situations
2. Differing subunit goals and perceptions

3. Concerns about status and authority

Win-lose situations are sometimes created through reward systems that are instituted on an individual basis, resulting in personnel not wanting to cooperate or share information with one another. Win-lose conflicts also frequently arise when resources are limited, and staff must compete with one another for needed materials or services.

In situations where differing subunit goals and perceptions exist, conflict is also often prevalent. The goals of the physical education instructor, for example, whose class is held outside the school library might differ from the goals of the librarian. Theses situations also tend to produce conflict.

Issues of status and authority that create conflict can take on a variety of forms, including "apple polishing", need for autonomy, and prestige building. Conflict of this genre often occurs when demands are made on one group of employees by another group with equal or inferior status.

Administrators can work toward identifying the special characteristics of a given conflict situation by analyzing the situation on the basis of the three above listed sources. Spotting situations with these characteristics as a potential sources of future conflict can be very useful. Understanding and identifying these sources of organizational conflict is a significant step toward effective management.

REACTIONS TO CONFLICT

A variety of coping mechanisms exist for reacting to conflict in

organizations.* One possible and very common reaction to organizational conflict is avoidance. Simply withdrawing from the situation, or evading and avoiding disagreements can characterize this response. Avoidance is seldom a long-term solution to serious conflict, but it does provide the advantage of allowing a period to reappraise a problem and possibly to diffuse unnecessary hostility. Another method often adopted is called "smoothing", which consists of organizing discussions that are limited to only issues where conflicting parties can agree. This approach also ignores the source of conflict, but can increase appreciation and respect between hostile groups. Hostility can be defused, but again beneficial outcomes are often short-term. Another recognized technique in conflict resolution is forcing, which occurs through the exercise of power. Forcing is a technique used most often in emergency situations, when action must be implemented swiftly. Decisions are made either by the people with the most authority within the organization, or by a neutral arbitrator.

Compromising and collaborating are both techniques used in conflict resolution also. Compromising can often be the best possible response to conflict, as bargaining and trading typically produce some satisfaction for each participant. A weakness of this approach, however, is that all sides are usually left partially unsatisfied, too. The original issues, when mediated through compromise, have not been resolved on the basis of their merits, and this can also be a source of future disharmony. Collaboration can result in satisfaction of all involved parties, but this method is usually more time consuming and often more difficult a process. This approach

*Source: Fisher, Dalmar, Communication in Organization (1981)

involves examination of a full range of alternatives and a neutral search for the most beneficial outcome. While collaboration might be the best method, in one sense, it can be impractical because it is so time consuming. Administrators are most likely to find that each of these five methods (avoiding, smoothing, forcing, compromising, and collaborating) has specific value in different situations. Matching the source of conflict to time constraints to methods of resolution requires administrative awareness of each mode and careful analysis of the variables involved in a given situation.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES

Organizational conflict is often complex and full of variety. While there is no single technique that can be prescribed to deal with organizational conflict, there are three basic responses administrators should consider when confronted with conflict. They can be implemented singly or in combinations with one another. Skill in each will increase the effectiveness of management action.

One approach to resolving organizational conflict is increasing intergroup contacts. More frequent contact can serve a variety of purposes, including increasing communication and reducing stereotyping. When such contacts are perceived to be for the purpose of developing joint solutions, sharing information, increasing understanding and respect, the outcomes can be highly constuctive. When increased contact is simply seen by participants as providing a forum for more propaganda and arguing; however, this action

can be counterproductive. Careful assessment of the value of this interactive technique must be an administrative concern before, during, and after these sessions.

A form of increased intergroup contact is labeled organizational confrontation and has been used successfully even in very disruptive cases of conflict. Contending parties are brought together in a highly structured format (usually with the aid of management consultants) and asked first to agree to work on improving their relationships. When this agreement is reached, the participants are then requested to write down personal perceptions of themselves and of the contending group. These perceptions are then shared. The groups are subsequently separated, and asked to analyze and explain the differences in perceptions. Each member is encouraged to investigate how individual actions have contributed to the other group's misperceptions. In later meetings, their analyses are shared with one another, discussed, and further clarified. These sessions hopefully end with the establishment of mutual goals as the result of better understanding.

A second approach to organizational conflict resolution is the development of a superordinate goal. A superordinate goal is a goal desired by both conflicting parties that requires cooperation between the groups to be achieved. When antagonists share a common goal, competition is reduced and cooperation takes its place. Friendships begin to form as cooperative efforts increase. Creative administration is required in the identification of a superordinate goal. They are goals not usually easy to locate, but constructive results often come from the effort.

The third conflict management strategy identified in research involves restructuring the organization, Structural remedies can be effective when the source of the conflict is structurally inherent in the form of the organization. Structural solutions can be attained through separating conflicting groups from each other organizationally, by redefining task assignments and responsibilities and by changing the hierarchical structure. Another structural change strategy involves combining the conflicting groups through assignment of a shared function. Using the concepts of specialization and coordination, new organizational designs can be developed. New designs can change structural features in such a way as to reduce conflict between individuals or groups within the organization.

These three approaches to resolving organizational conflict (intergroup contacts, superordinate goals, and organizational restructuring) require particular managerial skills. But creative problem solving involves more than simply having a repertoire of special approaches. It involves a personal, psychological relationship that contributes to more positive feelings and a growing trust among those involved. Leaders can establish a helpful psychological climate for conflict resolution by personally developing particular qualities in themselves. Effective managers need a sense of humor, the ability to listen carefully, the willingness to accept the feelings of others, to keep relationships and communication open, and the flexibility to try experimental solutions. With established effective procedures and ground rules in an organization, the development of conflict can be welcomed.

In discussing the positive aspects of organizational conflict, Lippitt

and Taylor list the following possible creative outcomes:

1. Opens up an issue in a confronting manner
2. Develops clarification of an issue
3. Increases involvement
4. Improves problem-solving quality
5. Provides more spontaneity in communication
6. Is needed for growth
7. Strengthens a relationship when creatively resolved
8. Can increase productivity

SUMMARY

In summary, organizational conflict can be productive conflict, often depending upon the effectiveness of an administrator's response. Conflict management requires accurate understanding of its sources, analytical tools for conceptual comprehension, and a variety of strategies for effective management within the organizational environment.